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There's no success like failure,  
And ... failure's no success at all.

—Bob Dylan, “Love Minus Zero/No Limit,” *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965)

- 1 Dating from two years before David Goodis's death at age 49, the above epigraph encapsulates this writer's dark vision in 17 novels published between 1946 and 1967. His first effort, *Retreat from Olivion* (1939), fails to qualify as part of the defining oeuvre by being “a Hemingwayesque study of the infidelities of two couples set against the backdrop of wars in Spain and China” (Schmid, “David Goodis” 158). Negative reviews apparently led Goodis to decide that his aspirations for acceptance as a “serious” author were unrealistic. Seven years later, after churning out as many as 10,000 words a day for pulp magazines, he released *Dark Passage* (1946) in hardback after its serialization in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Initial failure turned into overnight success when Warner Brothers hired Goodis to collaborate with director Delmer Daves on a screen adaptation starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Goodis's brooding tale of Vincent Parry, who after being wrongly convicted of murdering his wife escapes from San Quentin, finds tenuous hope for a new beginning with rescuer Irene Janney, and undergoes plastic surgery on his face, anticipates other plots of males on the run from their pasts. What this synopsis fails to capture, though, is the paranoid world of isolation, obsession, and self-doubt inhabited by virtually all of Goodis's protagonists.<sup>1</sup> At the same time those characters in the early postwar novels, despite nightmarish reversals in their lives, maintain a sentimental faith in the American Dream, especially as it relates to romantic fulfillment and the idea of family. As early as 1951, however, Goodis's paperback fiction begins to demonstrate that paradigm's bankruptcy.
- 2 Before his indictment for having bludgeoned his wife to death, 31-year-old Parry worked as a lowly clerk in a San Francisco investment-security firm and took a correspondence course in statistics in order to boost his weekly salary from \$35 to \$45, primarily so that he could appease his shrewish and unfaithful bride.<sup>2</sup> Behind this decision is a fatuous awe of the lifestyle enjoyed by the company's top echelon,

prompting Parry to think that “if he used his head and had some luck he might be able to climb up toward where they were” (103). Counterbalancing the plodding advancement implicit in this scenario of upward mobility is a fantasy of escaping to the picturesque beaches of Patavilca, Peru, images of which he once saw in travel brochures. When Vincent Parry shares this idyll with his only friend named George Fellsinger, a bachelor also toiling away for \$35 a week at a similar job, Fellsinger warmly embraces the idea. In both cases Goodis is framing a tension at the heart of the American Dream's mythography, one that pits the idea of gradually ascending the corporate ladder against preemptively abandoning the effort altogether.

- 3 Surprisingly, given the nihilism of his novels published as pulp paperbacks from 1951 onward, *Dark Passage*'s ending allows for the possibility of romanticized escape. After Parry, equipped with a new face and pseudonym, elicits from sociopath Madge Rapf a confession that she murdered both his former wife and his sole friend, Rapf hurls herself through a fifth-story window in order to deny Parry the opportunity to prove his innocence. Upon this development Vincent immediately thinks of his benefactress Irene Janney: “[H]e wanted to take her with him but he couldn't take her with him because ... they would always be running away and even though the road was wide it was dark, frantic, and there was no certainty.” Despite this concern Parry telephones Janney, who represents “the happiness, the sweet purity he had always wanted” (189), and invites her to rendezvous with him in Patavilca after a circumspect lapse of time. She readily agrees, allowing Goodis's coda to hint at a “happily-ever-after” future for the couple, but much earlier in the text some revelations about Irene's past qualify whether her interest in Vincent is simply a case of personal attraction. For one thing, readers as well as the protagonist learn from a newspaper clipping that Janney's father died in 1928 after serving four years of a sentence to life imprisonment in San Quentin for having murdered his second wife, whom he suspected of infidelity. The eerie parallel to Parry's history warrants the inference that Irene's selfless intervention on Vincent's part after his escape from the same prison may stem from her desire to compensate for the death of a father figure whom she hardly knew.<sup>3</sup> The novel also discloses that three years ago she married out of loneliness “a complete failure. A statistician making forty-five a week in an investment security house” (47). Once more the duplication of Parry's work career casts a shadow over the prospect of shared fulfillment in Peru. “In Goodis's world,” remarks Woody Haut, “a single event in the past often causes debilitating problems in the future” (28), attesting to the “doomed romanticism” of his corpus as a whole (Gertzman 15).
- 4 A singular exception to that pattern is *Nightfall* (1947), which ends optimistically. The narrative is unique as well for how it encompasses central elements of the American Dream, although that dimension cannot be predicted from the tale's ominously claustrophobic opening. Standing by a window in his Greenwich Village apartment on a steamy summer night, 33-year-old commercial artist James Vanning
 

wanted to talk to somebody. He wanted to go out.  
 He was afraid to go out.  
 And he realized that. The realization brought on more fright .... And suddenly he  
 was telling himself that something was going to happen tonight. (195)
- 5 Besieged by phantasmagoric flashbacks of having killed a man in Colorado, the former Navy officer ventures out and strikes up a conversation with an easy-going stranger who, in the course of exchanging pleasantries, reveals that with a wife and three children he is happily married. Tellingly, Vanning admits that the freedom of being

single “gets monotonous. I think if you’re normal you’ve got to have someone” (200). The novel’s second chapter ends with a vignette of the man identified simply as Fraser returning home to his domestic haven, but subsequently the text discloses that he is a New York City detective who has been surveilling Vanning in connection with a \$300,000 bank robbery in Seattle. Although Fraser believes the commercial artist to be innocent of the crime, he still has to investigate the circumstances of Vanning’s having killed a heist mastermind named Fred Harrison near Denver before disappearing with a leather satchel containing the money in thousand-dollar bills.

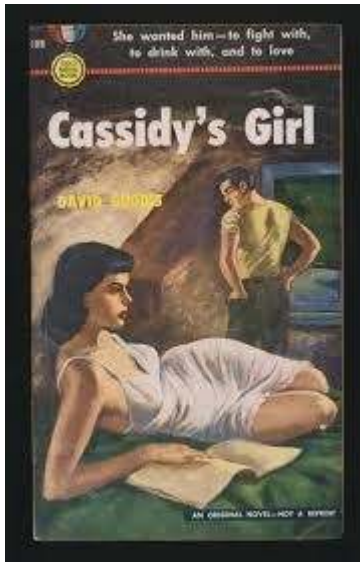
- 6 Goodis’s next gambit of narrative deception is to introduce a *femme fatale*, a fixture in his corpus, who will become Vanning’s all-consuming love interest. That same evening at a local bar the lonely protagonist finds himself singled out for attention by an attractive woman who plays a dual role in the novel.<sup>4</sup> Vanning’s initial impression of Martha Gardner registers this duality in oxymoronic fashion: “Voluptuous, but in a quiet, wholesome way” (209). After dinner together he realizes that she has lured him into a trap when three toughs, whom Vanning vaguely remembers having encountered in Colorado, accost, abduct, and abuse him in an effort to recover the \$300,000. Amid this ordeal he also recalls having escaped from these same thugs in a Denver hotel room, after which he killed Harrison and then lost the satchel in a forest while fleeing for his life. Hopping freight trains from there to New Orleans and working blue-collar jobs under several aliases by way of Memphis to New York, Vanning soon puts together a portfolio of sketches that earn him commissions from advertising agencies. Such freelance employment during the era of Norman Rockwell’s popularity as an illustrator likely contributes to Goodis’s evocation of Vanning’s quintessentially American longing:

He had a weakness for the moon. It gave him pain, but he wanted to see it up there. And beyond that want ... was the want for someone to be at his side, looking at the moon as he looked at it, sharing the moon with him. He was so lonely. And sometimes in this loneliness ... he told himself he was missing out on the one thing he wanted above all else, a woman to love, a woman with whom he could make a home. A home. And children. He almost wept whenever he thought about it and realized how far away it was .... [A]t times it seemed as though the moon was shaking its big pearly head and telling him it was no go, he might as well forget about it and stop eating his heart out. (244)

- 7 The passage resonates with a deep-seated yearning for the transcendent like that depicted by William Blake in a 1793 engraving of a man beginning his long ascent to a crescent moon, below which plate appear the words “I want! I want!”<sup>5</sup> Goodis renders this metaphysical yearning in terms of the American Dream, but in *Nightfall* that mythos is not presented as delusionary. The novel’s ending bears out this atypically hopeful resolution.
- 8 The shift toward such a coda gathers momentum when Vanning begins to associate Martha Gardner with everything that “made life worth living” (278). After calling on Gardner at her third-floor residence, he becomes enamored of the woman who formerly entrapped him, while she reciprocates as both delve below the series of events that have compromised them. “There were two sides to Martha Gardner,” decides Vanning, “and what he had thought was the hidden side was not hidden at all, it was actual, it was living, breathing, performing” (305). Although the last participle is clearly equivocal, the work’s final three chapters dramatize a kind of redemption once Fraser convinces Goodis’s protagonist to confront his abductors in the presence of Martha,

who intervenes to save the detective as well as Vanning. The reformed *femme fatale* thus vindicates herself, as does James when he breaks through what Fraser terms his “regressive amnesia” by recalling the exact place in Colorado where he lost the satchel (334). All's well that ends well in this third novel by Goodis. Detective Fraser can now collect his \$15,000 reward for getting Vanning to recall where the money is located, and the newly enfranchised lovers freed from their pasts can conceive of a future together somewhere this side of Patavilca.

- 9 Such serendipity in Goodis's early postwar novels, a period that W. H. Auden famously described as the “Age of Anxiety,” should not come as a complete surprise. “Hard-boiled crime fiction and sentimental literature,” Leonard Cassuto has argued, “share a deep concern with the kinds of community that can be formed in a society shaped by individualism and capitalist modernization” (3). In *Nightfall*, he observes, “Vanning repeatedly mourns the home life he can't set up with the woman he doesn't have. His mourning takes the sepia-tinted form of idealized American domesticity, a series of stereotypical images that symbolize all that he wants and lacks” (102). This sentimental construct underwent revitalization at a time when hundreds of thousands of returning World War II veterans were seeking housing in planned communities like Levittown, New York, spawning the idea of self-sufficient nuclear families in suburban utopias and rejecting a prewar demography of extended immigrant families clustered together in deteriorating city enclaves. Jay A. Gertzman documents as well how it was incumbent on Goodis in his early novels to satisfy the expectations of mainstream hardback publishers such as Messner, Appleton, and Morrow for upbeat resolutions, notwithstanding the pervasively Kafkaesque cast of his narratives exploring existential alienation and paralysis. Immediately after *Dark Passage* and the commercial success of its Bogart-Bacall film adaptation, Goodis therefore felt obliged to “leave audiences with a hopeful, uplifting ending” that “equated to reinforced belief in the democratic ideal” (Gertzman 87).
- 10 This authorial concession vanished abruptly upon Goodis's decision to issue his noir novels as paperback originals, most of which were published by Fawcett Gold Medal and sold for 25 cents, beginning with *Cassidy's Girl* (1951). In an impressive study of this popular genre and the industry's lurid covers, Geoffrey O'Brien says of Goodis, “There was undoubtedly more promise at the outset of his career than accomplishment at the end, and he seems indeed to have followed the downward course charted by so many of his characters” (88). Nonetheless, O'Brien lauds this still largely neglected author as “a poet of the losers” who, writing “in a vein of tortured lyricism all his own,” transformed “cut-rate melodramas into traumatic visions of failed lives” (90).<sup>6</sup> That Goodis's sixth and crossover novel resonated with a broad swath of the American public is attested by the fact that it reportedly sold over a million copies (Haut 9).



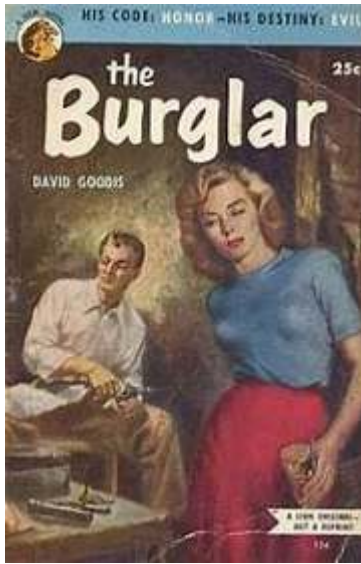
- 11 Commercial success of this magnitude is revealing because of the narrative's unrelentingly bleak setting and outlook. At age 36 protagonist James Cassidy, formerly a gridiron star at the University of Oregon who graduated third in his class before completing 80 bombing missions as a B-24 aviator during World War II, is living in the slums of Philadelphia and working as a bus driver on the 60-mile route to Easton. Haunted by the memory of being unjustly held derelict as a transatlantic pilot for the deaths of all but ten passengers who survived a crash shortly after takeoff from LaGuardia Airport, Cassidy started drinking heavily and has been married for almost four years to a raven-haired virago named Mildred (see image below) who torments him by her earthy sexuality. Then one night at Lundy's Place, a waterfront saloon where his friends Spann, Pauline, and Shealy routinely congregate, he meets Doris, a "small, fragile, pale woman" in her late twenties, behind whose plainness Cassidy detects "Something kind and sweet. Something sanitary. And yet ... as he saw the way she raised her glass, he knew instantly she was an alcoholic" (24). Apropos of this novel Haut writes that "Goodis's male protagonists cannot easily relate to women, who assume the role of *wife* or *waif*. Though both are one-sided *femmes fatales*, the wife is invariably a man-eater and a mother figure, while the waif is a surrogate daughter, sister[,] and virgin" (26-27). The next morning, waking up on the floor of Doris's shabby apartment, Cassidy learns that she too is on the run from a traumatic past involving her husband's and children's deaths three years ago when their Nebraska farmhouse caught fire while she was smoking in bed. The common bond of having been accessories to tragedies earlier in their lives prompts Cassidy to etherealize Doris and drag himself away from the possessive Mildred.
- 12 David Schmid has posited that "Goodis's obsession with testing the limits and redefining the characteristics of masculinity gives coherence to his work and is his most original contribution to the noir genre. Rather than using two-dimensional tough guys, Goodis rewrites noir conventions by peopling his novels with wounded and vulnerable male protagonists" ("Different" 154). Played off against this exploration of wounded masculinity in Goodis's later novels, Schmid maintains, is "a fatalism so intense it becomes inertia" ("Different" 162). The claim describes Cassidy well. Piloting a bus each workday to Easton and back to Philadelphia is emotionally important to

Cassidy because “[k]eeping his eyes on the road and his mind on the wheel was a protective fence holding him back from internal as well as external catastrophe” (1). His sole need is to be “at the controls” (16), however far he has descended in life, but even that satisfaction is denied to Cassidy when a drunken salesman named Haney Kenrick, who has been attempting to seduce Mildred, causes the bus to overturn, killing its 26 other riders. Once more Cassidy is held responsible. Earlier he had envisioned escape from the waterfront slums’ “gray stagnation” by marrying Doris and moving “uptown to one of those low-rent housing projects where each little house had a patch of green in front” (55), but that dream implodes with the highway accident. After escaping from the police and making his way back to Lundy’s Place, Goodis’s harried protagonist realizes that “no matter what moves he made, no matter what he tried to do, he just wouldn’t get anywhere” (107). Sexually manipulative wife Mildred reasserts her claims on him, and as the novel ends Cassidy comes to a mournful realization:

Now he was able to understand the utter futility of his attempt to rescue Doris. There was no possibility of rescue. She didn’t want to be rescued. His efforts to drag her away from the liquor had been based on a false premise, and his motive, now that he could see it objectively, had been more selfish than noble. His pity for Doris had been the reflection of pity that he felt for himself. His need for Doris had been the need to find something worthwhile and gallant within himself. (178)

- 13 The *Life* magazine version of the American Dream, insofar as it filtered down to denizens of the nation’s inner cities, was in Goodis’s 1950s fiction simply dead on arrival.
- 14 The same is true of three follow-up novels that the reclusive author wrote while living until his death at his parents’ house in Philadelphia. *The Burglar* (1953) is even more despairing than *Cassidy’s Girl* in carrying forward the theme of a waif for whom 34-year-old Nathaniel Harbin harbors a quasi-incestuous attachment. Their relationship begins during the Great Depression when at age 16 in Iowa the orphaned Harbin “found himself on a road going away from the little town” (362). Close to starvation while hitchhiking in Nebraska, he is picked up by a kind-hearted parolee named Gerald Gladden traveling with his young daughter, whose mother died in childbirth. After mentoring Nat in the science of burglary and instilling in him a male code of personal honor at all costs, Gerald is killed by police during a bungled second-story job in the Detroit suburbs, after which Harbin feels an obligation to protect Gerald’s daughter. While on the lam with her in Cleveland, he at 19 then has documents drawn up designating the ten-year-younger girl as “his kid sister. He couldn’t think of a good first name for her, so he decided on Gladden” (363). Subsequently forming a partnership with two other burglars, Baylock and Dohmer, the protagonist is conscripted by the Army for active duty in World War II, during which interim Gladden is entrusted to the care of Baylock’s sister in Kansas City. Five years thereafter, when the novel opens, its four-member burglary crew has just succeeded in stealing emeralds worth approximately \$100,000, with Gladden being responsible for casing the mansion, but though a blonde she is repeatedly described in terms of her emaciated “skinniness” (339), hardly making her the curvaceous vixen depicted below.



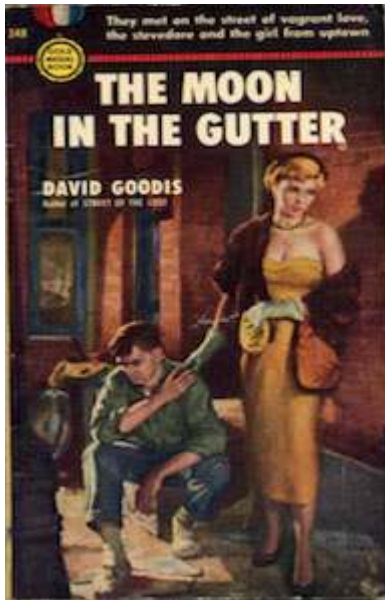


- 15 From the outset Harbin also dimly recognizes that his “relationship with Gladden ... was unnatural” because he figures as her surrogate father *and* brother (340). The Freudian impasse is complicated further by the development that, after Harbin sends Gladden off to Atlantic City for a vacation, he meets a twice-married woman named Della who unabashedly makes clear her interest in him as a prospective lover. At this juncture Goodis introduces a pastoral version of the American Dream when Della promises Harbin that together they can leave behind their pasts by escaping to her idyllic farm in “the greenest hills you ever saw” just beyond Lancaster (376).
- 16 In several of Goodis’s novels, strong and self-confident women are made to seem duplicitous, perhaps as a consequence of his brief marriage to Elaine Astor.<sup>7</sup> This occurs in *The Burglar* when Harbin, shortly after spending the night with Della, announces to Baylock and Dohmer that he is opting out of their partnership, only to discover in the next chapter during a moonlit night at her rustic retreat that outside near a pond she is engaged in conspiratorial conversation with another man. The interloper, Harbin discovers the following day, is a young blond man, later identified as Charley Hackett, one of two patrolmen who a few evenings earlier nearly interrupted the emerald robbery. Before meeting Goodis’s protagonist Della had been involved with Hackett, who is smitten by her, in various shakedown operations, but having met Harbin she is seeking to extricate herself from that faltering relationship. Meanwhile, as yet unaware of this background, Harbin like his counterpart in *Cassidy’s Girl* is divided between two poles of magnetic attraction. On the one hand, he realizes that “he wanted Della more than he had ever wanted anything,” but at the same time her association with Hackett means that “[t]his thing was aiming at Gladden” (394). Heeding his mentor Gerald’s many injunctions about the masculinist code of personal honor, Harbin the next evening, as moonlight illuminates a remote woods, repudiates Della with deliberate cruelty, having experienced anew a “throbbing need to take care of Gladden” (415).
- 17 Psychological conditioning here becomes a form of determinism, as the last half of *The Burglar* relentlessly documents. While en route to Atlantic City at night during a raging storm, Harbin’s panicked cohorts draw revolvers during a traffic stop, and during the ensuing mêlée three cops as well as Dohmer are killed. Before dawn the next morning Harbin then drives his car off a pier into the ocean and holes up with Baylock at a seedy



hotel. Events ratchet up when it is discovered that under a pseudonym Hacket has been exploiting Gladden in an attempt to recover the emeralds. At this juncture, once she refuses to leave with Harbin, the narrative sets up a series of fated reversals that allow for no escape. When Della reappears at the seaside resort and convinces him of her love, Goodis's protagonist responds by making a vow that he will be unable to keep: "We'll go to the place on the hill and we'll stay there together. I know for sure now that's the only way it can be. Nothing can break this up between you and me" (437). In a tangled climax Hacket sets out to kill Gladden, thinking she is in possession of the gemstones, after giving Della his gun to detain Harbin during his absence. To the latter's consternation she attempts to do just that because she wants Nat to be free of Gladden's hold over him. Gerald's protégé ironically responds by saying "something that sounded like, 'Really, I can't do that. It wouldn't be honorable'" (447). When he reaches Gladden at her hotel, she professes a long-suppressed love for him, and Harbin responds in kind, though "He knew it was Gerald ... causing him to say it as he said, 'I love you, Gladden'" (454). The novel's final chapters poignantly dramatize the ineluctability of their foredoomed end. Under a full moon, after the rejected Hacket has choked Della to death, Gladden shoots him four times while he is about to kill Harbin on the Atlantic City beach. Realizing that they are trapped, the two swim seaward until "Nothingness glided in" and they descend to the ocean's floor in each other's arms (475).

- 18 Such a thalassic *Liebestod* is inconceivable in *The Moon in the Gutter* (1953), which atmospherically bears comparison with Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1945). The oppressive setting is Vernon Street in Philadelphia's dockyard slums, where stevedore William Kerrigan, age 35, is haunted by the grisly suicide seven months earlier of his 23-year-old sister Catherine in an alley after she had been raped. The yet unsolved assault deprived this Madonna figure of her virginity, and Kerrigan is driven by a compulsion to discover the perpetrator, prompting him often to revisit the site where Catherine's bloodstains are still visible. Meanwhile, when not frequenting Dugan's Den, the local dive for a clientele comprised primarily of neighborhood alcoholics, Goodis's protagonist is sharing a bedroom with tormented younger brother Frank at their father Tom's dilapidated three-story house, handed down through four generations, in an ethnically stratified area of tenements. On the first floor of this run-down residence live also Tom's bellicose third wife Lola and her amply endowed daughter Bella, technically Kerrigan's step-sister, with whom he has been having a carnal relationship. Amid the loosely linked family's poverty and dysfunctionality, Bill Kerrigan without knowing it is susceptible to anyone who represents an alternative to the metonymic gutter.
- 19 That person materializes one day when Loretta Channing visits Dugan's Den in search of her dissolute and mentally imbalanced brother Newton. Although her depiction by Fawcett Gold Medal's cover artist as wearing a mink stole is a fanciful touch, the blurb at the top is accurate enough: "They met on the street of vagrant love, the stevedore and the girl from uptown."



- 20 Drawn to Loretta by her sociocultural difference but wary of what he wrongly construes as patronizing condescension, Kerrigan will find out only much later that her personal history is every bit as fractured as his own. Despite the advantages of having grown up in a comparatively privileged environment, Loretta too has known adversity. After her brother at age 17 with a new driver's license took their parents out for a ride that killed them both, he a few years later married the family housekeeper, a woman in her mid-forties, and after their divorce wedded an even older fortune hunter fond of swilling expensive bourbon. To escape this hellish state of affairs at her parents' former home, 20-year-old Loretta married a young dentist, but the union foundered because of her sense of responsibility for Newton. Such parallels between their pasts might have led Bill Kerrigan to recognize a common bond, but the crippling social Darwinism of Goodis's milieu makes that impossible. *The Moon in the Gutter* thus traces an arc of inevitable stasis, defeat, and doom that became the author's hallmark in his noir fiction of the 1950s.
- 21 In the novel's sixth chapter Rita Montanez, a prostitute of African and Portuguese descent, reminds Kerrigan as her childhood friend that Vernon Street is "no place for softies" (516). The comment is apposite because Rita knows that Bill's obsession with his sister's rape and suicide can be his undoing. Another of Kerrigan's peers and a regular at Dugan's Den, a sign-painter named Mooney once "hailed as an important discovery in the art circles of Europe" (484), cautions him as well against trying to solve the mystery of his sister's violation. Unable to negotiate two incommensurate claims on his commitment, one involving everything associated with the depredations of Vernon Street and the other epitomized by the possibility of escape from the slums, the stevedore eventually capitulates when "He told himself he wanted [Loretta], he had to have her" (567). Nonetheless, though he is on the verge of bidding "farewell to the tenements and the shacks ... the vacant lots littered with rubbish, the yowling of cats in dark alleys ... there was one dark alley that refused to accept the farewell" (570). A few pages later "a kind of paralysis" overtakes Kerrigan when he marries Loretta Channing at night in a tawdry ceremony conducted by the local officiant (574).

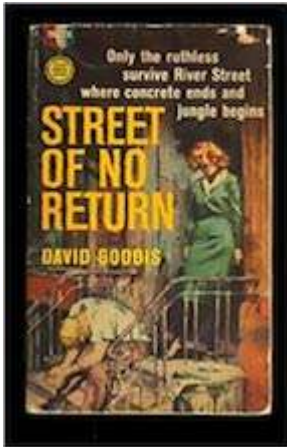
22 Farce and reversal ensue immediately. Having gotten dead-drunk at Dugan's Den on his wedding night, Kerrigan awakens the next morning in his stepmother Lola's bed before, indignantly, she begins pummeling her just-retuned husband Tom. Lapsing into a stupor as domestic chaos erupts, Goodis remarks laconically, his protagonist "sensed there was nothing strange about it, after all. It was merely the sound of the house where he lived. It was as though he'd been away and he'd come back, and it was nice to be home again" (583). The short-lived fantasy of escaping Vernon Street with Loretta Channing, a projected icon of the American Dream, ends for Bill Kerrigan. Bella reasserts her proprietary claims on him; his unconsummated marriage to "the golden-haired dream girl from uptown" is annulled; and unable to discover the man responsible for his sister Catherine's rape Kerrigan hears the Street jeering, "So whatcha gonna do about it?" (615). Although a slighter work than *The Burglar* in terms of psychological complexity, *The Moon in the Gutter* relentlessly advances the outlook of naturalism associated with Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925).

23 *Street of No Return* (1954) takes the theme of urban victimization and catatonic fixity even further. The novel's opening tableau perfectly frames the condition signified in its title:

There were three of them sitting on the pavement with their backs against the wall of the flophouse. It was a biting cold night in November and they sat there close together trying to get warm. The wet wind from the river came knifing through the street to cut their faces and get inside their bones, but they didn't seem to mind. They were discussing a problem that had nothing to do with the weather. In their minds it was a serious problem, and as they talked their eyes were solemn and tactical. They were trying to find a method of obtaining some alcohol.

'We need a drink,' one said. 'We need a drink and that's all there is to it.' (621)

24 The three derelicts huddled together on River Street in Philadelphia are members of "the unchartered society of the homeless and the hopeless" (623), but Goodis's narrative delves into the background of only one of them. Standing five feet seven and weighing 145 pounds, Whitey at age 33 has been so dubbed by companions Bones and Phillips because of his snow-white hair. Having arrived on Skid Row seven years ago, he was once a singing sensation named Eugene Lindell who at the peak of his recording fame at 25 "was making close to a thousand a week and they were saying he'd soon hit the gold mine, the dazzling bonanza of naming his own price" (680). Just at that point in his career, however, Lindell became infatuated with one Celia who, besides having a jail record for prostitution, is the common-law spouse of a gangster called Sharkey intent on a big score. When Lindell insists on pursuing Celia, Sharkey allows his enforcers Chop and Bertha to beat him, in the course of which punishment they crush his larynx, such that by the time Whitey arrives on Skid Row he can speak only in a hoarse whisper.



- 25 In light of this overview, Fawcett Gold Medal's cover for *Street of No Return* is strangely misleading. While the dejected male in the lower left corner can pass as a facsimile of Whitey, the woman standing behind him is no equivalent for either the slender Celia or beefy Bertha, the novel's only female characters.<sup>8</sup> Such a skewed representation may be owing to the tendency of artists commissioned by the publishers of pulp paperbacks to feature sexually alluring women in the foreground with smaller figures of males either behind or to the side of them, as in the three other images shown earlier in this essay. The anomaly is all the more curious because *Street of No Return* is very much an androcentric novel. Although Celia and Bertha have key roles, they act at the bidding of Sharkey, who later in the text is also manipulating a tough Puerto Rican named Gerardo to foment nightly riots and murderous rampage in the Hellhole, a racial powder keg in the City of Brotherly Love. Sharkey's larger goal is to force City Hall to sack Precinct Captain Kinnard so that, upon suborned Lieutenant Taggert's promotion, he can syndicate all crime in the area while making regular payoffs to the police. Early in the novel Whitey escapes from the station house after being arrested for the murder of a patrolman who was one of Gerardo's victims during the havoc, but at the end he is vindicated after guiding Kinnard to Sharkey's hideout where crates of .38 revolvers and ammunition are cached for use in the next night's mayhem. Given all this civic unrest, however, *Street of No Return*'s final paragraph lives up to its title by depicting a scene of retrogressive inertia: Whitey, Bones, and Phillips are in the exact same position as at the start but now have a bottle of whiskey to share. Before this bleak coda Goodis comments, "It was a land of boozed-up dreams where nothing mattered, where nothing special happened, like on the moon. There was no use trying for the moon[,] and it was the same no-dice with Skid Row" (771).
- 26 Entrapment is Goodis's recurrent theme, but at the same time he valorizes his male protagonists' capacity for stoic endurance. When Sharkey, Celia, Chop, and Bertha resurface in Whitey's life after seven years, for example, he knows intuitively that "yesterday could never be really discarded, it was always a part of now .... For all buried memories were nothing more than slow-motion boomerangs, taking their own sweet time to come back" (675). Despite this awareness, however, and despite having been physically intimidated by Captain Kinnard earlier, Whitey recognizes that "Somehow it seems right" to report at the station house what he has discovered about the instigators of urban violence (770). Whitey's decision does nothing to mitigate his entrapment by consequences deriving from the past, but his perseverance saves the lives of others. What Goodis heralds, in other words, is not Whitey's vague recollection

of an abstract moral principle but, instead, his willingness to expose himself to possible repercussions of his actions in the present. Contrasting Goodis's noir protagonists with Dashiell Hammett's and Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled, self-sufficient private investigators, Schmid concludes about this later novelist's wounded heroes that "Rather than dismissing them as 'unmanly' failures, Goodis celebrates ... their willingness to prioritize vulnerability over toughness, openness over isolation" ("Different" 175).

- 27 Implicit in this discussion has been the complex relation of noir fiction to literary modernism. Acknowledging the genre's mode of production during the 1950s, Clive Bloom makes the Marxian point that pulp constitutes "a refusal of bourgeois consciousness and bourgeois forms of realism" (14). A critical commonplace holds, of course, that the same animus guided Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf as leading architects of high modernism, but given the oversimplification of that movement's allegedly elitist bias against various forms of demotic culture it might appear that noir fiction represents an unaccountable aberration. Lee Horsley begins her wide-ranging monograph on the genre, however, by arguing just the opposite: "The noir thriller is one of the most durable popular expressions of the kind of modernist pessimism epitomised in *The Waste Land*" (Noir 1). Shortly thereafter she expands on this claim about an intrinsic linkage:

Modernism might seem to be separated from ... pulp fiction by such qualities as its formal complexity and technical display, its aesthetic self-consciousness, its association with high culture and its rejection of classical narrative. But with its 'extraordinary compound' of apparently contradictory elements, modernism did encompass many impulses that found natural expression in a popular genre engaged in undermining the essentially optimistic thrust of other popular forms, such as detective and action adventure stories (Noir 3).

- 28 By repudiating the facile ratiocination of the classical or Golden Age whodunit as written by British authors Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and G. K. Chesterton, that is, noir fiction in its American manifestation extended the modernist sense of fragmentation, entropy, alienation, and despair abundantly evident in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and *The Secret Agent* (1907).
- 29 Still left open, though, is the question of whether or how to distinguish between hard-boiled and noir variants of pulp fiction. In a later contribution to a reference work on twentieth-century United States fiction, Horsley avoids any sharp distinction by using a slash between the adjectives in her title, although that may have been an intervention by editor David Seed.<sup>9</sup> "Precise definitions are not always easily agreed upon" because of an "overlapping relationship between the two terms," for which reason most of the primary texts she cites, including Goodis's *Dark Passage* and *Nightfall*, "could be classified as 'hard-boiled noir,' but the categories often diverge" ("Hard-Boiled/Noir" 135). If the interwar stories of Hammett resonated with "brutally effective masculine agency," the tradition in one of its manifestations veered toward "the skewed and 'screwed' narratives of the noir thriller" ("Hard-Boiled/Noir" 136). The latter hybrid in literature was influenced by classic *film noir* of the late 1940s and featured "clueless victims, unsuccessful crooks, outlaws, psychopaths, and a varied cast of other transgressors ... who are obsessed, pursued, paranoid, and, more often than not, doomed" ("Hard-Boiled/Noir" 137). During the fraught era of Cold War anxiety and Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunts, of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955) and William H. Whyte, Jr.'s *The Organization Man* (1956), of the Beat

Generation's manifestoes of disengagement in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), and William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959), Goodis's pulp tales of down-and-outers and their stoic endurance in inner-city slums attest to the postwar American Dream's paralysis for millions of people at the time.

- 30 In a review of the Library of America's release in 2012 of five noir novels by Goodis, Nathaniel Rich commented that unlike Hammett, Chandler, and Mickey Spillane, "Goodis has little interest in solving crimes and righting wrongs. His novels are more closely related to those of Jim Thompson ... with their obsessive explorations of psychological trauma. In these novels, the problem is life, and there are no solutions" (39). In a foreword to a reissuance of Thompson's profoundly disturbing *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), Stephen King touted it as "an American classic ... that deserves space on the same shelf with *Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *As I Lay Dying*." King goes on to say that Thompson "captured ... the spirit of the twentieth century's latter half: emptiness, a feeling of loss in a land of plenty, of unease amid conformity, of alienation in what was meant, in the wake of World War II, to be a generation of brotherhood" (viii). The same, I would submit, is true of Goodis's compelling body of fiction, which has been received with greater appreciation in Europe than in his native land. Goodis's prose, often stylistically pedestrian but at times lit by a lyrical intensity, requires generous-hearted readers, but in offering a critique of late modernity on behalf of the embattled and disenfranchised he probably would not have had it any other way.

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## NOTES

1. A brief overview of Goodis's fiction posits that its "essential concerns are those of the male paranoiac: insecurity about masculine identity and fear of female sexuality" (Duggan 14).

2. Although Goodis depicts his protagonist as "a decent sort of guy," he also makes clear what initially attracts Parry to his future spouse: "She was very thin herself and that was the way he liked them, thin. Very thin. She had practically no front development and nothing in back but that was the way he liked them and the first time he saw her he concentrated on the way she was constructed like a reed and he was interested." Like this novelist's prose style, which dispenses with punctuation between coordinated clauses, the two characters flow into each other's self-mirroring sameness. When his wife reproaches him for having married her "before years caught up with him and he wouldn't be able to get anything at all," Goodis pulls no punches in projecting his cynical view of mutual attraction that underlies the American Dream: "He said that wasn't true. He wanted to marry her because she was something he really wanted and if she would only work along with him they would be able to get along and they would find ways to be happy. He tried to make her happy. He thought a child would make her happy. He tried to give her a child and once he got one started but she went to a doctor and took pills. She said she hated the thought of having a child" (98). Much later in *Dark Passage*, after he has discovered the identity of his wife's murderer,



Parry is under the impression that “everything was all right now” and that, with Madge Rapf's confession to the crime, “his girl would be waiting for him” after a hard day at work (172). Deluded as this fantasy is, the American Dream dies hard.

3. This possibility is all the more plausible because Irene Janney “was nine when her father died and ... five when the trial took place” (41-42). Calvin Janney, a wealthy real-estate broker, is thus only an inchoate memory for his daughter.

4. In this connection see Maysaa Husam Jaber's book chapter titled “The Duality of David Goodis's Criminal Femmes Fatales” (113-28). Strangely enough, Jaber overlooks the example of Martha Gardner in *Nightfall*, concentrating instead on parallels in *Cassidy's Girl* and *Street of No Return*. For broader discussion of the *femme fatale* as an iconic figure of duplicity, see Julie Wheelwright's monograph.

5. Measuring only two by two-and-a-half inches, Blake's engraving reproduced below was part of a limited-edition book for children titled *The Gates of Paradise* (1793).



The embracing couple at the bottom right seems to represent the kind of romantic union to which the ladder-climber, like James Vanning in *Nightfall*, aspires.

6. Reprising O'Brien's description of Goodis, Aaron Finestone's comprehensive website on the novelist is devoted in its subtitle to “*Resurrecting the Poet of the Losers.*”

7. In a piece archived on the Goodis website, journalist Larry Withers documents that the author married strikingly attractive Elaine Astor on 7 October 1943 in Los Angeles. “There's speculation,” writes Withers, “whether she was an inspiration for Goodis'[s] more domineering female characters.” The short-lived marriage, during which Goodis wrote *Dark Passage*, ended in an uncontested divorce on 18 January 1946. This research by Withers corrects biographer Philippe Garnier's assertion that the couple married in 1942 and separated in 1943 (69, 165, 245). For a brief but incisive account of Goodis's life, see James Sallis.

8. The novel describes Celia as being “about five-four and very slim, almost skinny except for the sinuous lines that twisted and coiled, flowing warm-thin-sirupy under gray-green velvet that matched the color of her eyes” (679). In contrast, the sadistic Bertha is “Really huge. Around five-eleven and weighing over three hundred. Built like a tree trunk, no shape at all” (676-77).

9. My speculation is based on the fact that Horsley's original typescript as posted on [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) lists her title as “*Hard-Boiled and Noir in Twentieth-Century American Crime Fiction*” (emphasis added), but because of his edited volume's coverage Seed apparently shortened it to “*Hard-Boiled/Noir Fiction.*”

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## ABSTRACTS

In its depiction of marginalized characters trapped within inner-city slums, David Goodis's postwar fiction of the late 1940s through the 1950s constitutes a noir critique of the American Dream's paralysis. The defining elements of that paradigm—romantic fulfillment, family cohesion, upward mobility, suburban escape, egalitarian success, material prosperity—are systematically shown to be beyond attainment by the underprivileged and, thus, a mechanism of social victimization. At the same time, despite his *œuvre's* unremitting bleakness, Goodis valorizes his protagonists' capacity for endurance amid their alienation and disenfranchisement. During the fraught era of Cold War anxiety masked by mainstream conformism, this author's down-and-outers recognize the truth that "There's no success like failure, / And ... failure's no success at all." His pulp novels significantly extend late-modernist themes of fragmentation, entropy, and despair.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** David Goodis, noir fiction, American Dream, late modernism, urban entrapment, marginalization

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Robert Lance Snyder, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of West Georgia, most recently has published *The Post-Cold War Fiction of John le Carré* (University of Missouri Press, 2017) and *Eric Ambler's Novels: Critiquing Modernity* (Lexington Books, 2020), in addition to two dozen journal articles on espionage, hard-boiled, and American noir fiction. He serves as the invited Advisory Author overseeing a commemorative volume of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* on le Carré, forthcoming in 2021 from Layman Poupard Publishing.